



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE FOUNDING OF MAIN STREET

BY STANLEY T. WILLIAMS

## I

### THE LETTERS OF MRS. TROLLOPE

DURING the greatest distress of the Carlyle family, one of the brothers announced to Thomas, who was then fighting his way in Edinburgh, his intention of emigrating to America. Carlyle's response was characteristic: "You shall never," he shouted, "you shall *never* seriously meditate crossing the great Salt Pool to plant yourself in Yankee-land. That is a miserable fate for anyone, at best; never dream of it! Could you banish yourself from all that is interesting to your mind, forget the history, the glorious institutions, the noble principles of old Scotland—that you might eat a better dinner, perhaps?"

No true Victorian could do it, least of all the Victorians whom I shall mention. To plant oneself in Yankee-land for the sake of a good dinner? Never! However, to visit Yankee-land, to return to England, weighed down with lecture receipts, with copy for books on America, and with disgust at Yankee-land—this was another matter. In fact it was a practical way of getting the better dinner, both then and for one's posterity. We hear of various motives for English men of letters coming to this country. But let one in particular be noted: they wanted better dinners, then and unto the fourth generation, amen! It would be easy to make these selections from Victorian letters sound like the record of the export of American gold. These visitors deplore our table manners and sing *Te Deums* on the profits of their lectures. Everyone has heard of Dickens's rhapsodical description of Niagara Falls in his letters from America. This is nothing. Dickens is really lyrical when he sends a check to his London bankers. No one need wonder that English lecturers have come to us. Dickens's financial returns were enormous, even as the American

adoration of him was fatuous. Repercussions of his brass-band receptions penetrated Carlyle's sound-proof room in Chelsea. He growls, in *Past and Present*: "All Yankee-land follows a small, good 'Schnüspel, the distinguished novelist', with blazing torches, dinner invitations, universal hep-hep-hurrah!"

You may deny this materialism. If you do, I shall suspect you of not having read the American letters of these Victorians. Whatever their motives, they came, they saw, and they wrote about us; a far more deadly way of dealing with us than the tepid Cæsar's, who, you recall, merely conquered his enemies. Or, if he wrote, as I remember now that he did, he wrote dispassionately; he made few comments on hotels, and habits so personal as chewing tobacco. The Victorians wrote about us, and their letters have an indelible interest. They describe the beginnings of our culture, the founding of Main Street. The letters that I commend to you were written by four men and women of genius, and they cover more than a half-century of American history; from, to be exact, 1827 to 1884. The writers of these letters have ceased to be, and are now part of the great traditions of English literature. And the America which they described has also ceased to be, and belongs to our traditions of the past. It is something, I think, to see these pasts revive, and meet.

Moreover, these four were the first to "visit America" in the rôle of the distinguished literary man or woman. Now, of course, they come in boatloads with secretaries and private wireless. They debark at special depots, from which they begin the grand tour of America, Niagara Falls, Chicago, and five thousand women's clubs. A New York newspaper prints the exhausted comment of a steamship captain: "My God, why don't they stay on their foggy atoll?" Well, these were, I repeat, the first; the first to accept our hospitality, the first to raise curious eyebrows at our trains, our dress, our literature, our crazy-quilt flag. They were the first to see Main Street. These were the outriders of the whole motley throng, the precursors, the precedents, the predecessors, the forerunners, the van-couriers, the pioneers, the *prodromoi*, the bell-wethers. Yes, all Roget cannot make it too strong; this was the beginning of the invasion of America.

Perhaps it was symbolic that the first of these visitors should

have been chased on the way to America by a pirate-ship. "Your highness will recollect the proverb, Like to Like." The pirate apparently recognized the English lecturer in America as fair game, although we may question his judgment in not selecting the journey home for the raiding party.

This visitor was Mrs. Frances Milton Trollope, the mother of Anthony Trollope, and later the author of *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*. She came, with three young children, in the winter of 1827. After a seven weeks' voyage she landed at New Orleans; she sailed slowly up the Mississippi; and she lived, during the first part of her stay in America, in Cincinnati. Here, stalwart soul that she was, she tried to arrange for her husband a bazaar for the importation and sale of European fancy articles. It was not until August 5, 1831, that she again reached England. During the three years and a half that Mrs. Trollope was in America she saw every city of importance in the young republic. She studied us, every detail, our religion, politics, and literature, and our most intimate family usages. She coolly observed, and as coolly noted down everything that she saw, from the wild hogs in the streets of Cincinnati to the wild and spitting orator of Congress, Mr. This or That of Virginia, who kept entreating the House—such was his lyric cry—to "go the whole hog". Hogs, hogs, hogs! Mrs. Trollope saw them from her windows, she trampled them under foot in the streets, she dreamed of them at night. "I never," she says, "saw a newspaper without remarking such advertisements as the following: 'For Sale, two thousand barrels of prime pork.'" She came to think of the animal as the national emblem, just as she averred that the national perfume was a blend of onions and whiskey. She had, as far as America was concerned, far more than Carlyle "the devouring eye and the portrait-painting hand". These letters printed made, for the most part, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*. What a book! Matthew Arnold, here sixty years later, quoted it with a shudder.

Mrs. Trollope's letters are, as all good letters should be, gossip and *intime*. She says less of our national institutions than of our manners. She threw out, nevertheless, sharp comments on our darling notions of the State Politic. Like most Liberals who

visit us, she was disillusioned of her faith in democracy. She thought, for example, slavery less harmful to America than our fallacious belief in "equality". "You may hear this," she says, "declaimed upon in Congress, roared out in taverns, discussed in every drawing room, satirized upon the stage, nay, even anathematized from the pulpit: listen to it, and then look at them at home; you will see them with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty, and with the other flogging their slaves. You will see them one hour lecturing their mob on the indefeasible rights of man, and the next driving from their homes the children of the soil, whom they have bound themselves to protect by the most solemn treaties." And elsewhere Mrs. Trollope adds: "Strong indeed must be the love of equality in an English breast if it can survive a tour through the Union." As for the consequences of living in this land of equality, the lack of tradition, the lonely frontier life, Mrs. Trollope cannot believe in this type of independence, "the backwoods independence, of which so much is said in America." The following contrast between the humble life of England and America is typical:

It seemed to me that there was something awful and almost unnatural in their loneliness. No village bell ever summoned them to prayer, where they might meet the friendly greeting of their fellow men. When they die, no spot sacred by ancient reverence will receive their bones. Religion will not breathe her sweet and solemn farewell upon their grave; the husband or the father will dig the pit that is to hold them, beneath the nearest tree; he will himself deposit them within it, and the wind that whispers through the boughs will be their only requiem. But then, they pay neither taxes nor tithes, are never expected to pull off a hat or to make a curtsy, and will live and die without hearing or uttering the dreadful words, "God save the King".

The 'twenties and 'thirties in England were the years of Evangelicalism. Strife was bitter among the embattled parties of the Protestant faith. "I would not," John Keble said of the Dissenting churches, "be in one of them at service time for any consideration." Hurrell Froude declared that an Evangelical was one who "turned up the whites of his eyes, and said 'Lawd, Lawd'". It was natural that Evangelicalism should flourish violently in America. Religious freedom was a byword, and there revived many of the old "enthusiasms" of the seventeenth century. The license of this religion Mrs. Trollope could not understand. She

left a withering record of what she saw; so frank and so bitter, indeed, that I have thought best to temper her remarks. The striking fact about the following passage, which describes an American religious revival, is that Mrs. Trollope believes the hysteria she depicts to be typical of the religious condition of America. The first part of the description reveals Mrs. Trollope's feeling for beauty, which was in a large measure responsible for her revulsion before the ugliness of America:

The preachers came down from their stand and placed themselves in the midst of it, beginning to sing a hymn, calling upon the penitents to come forth. As they sung they kept turning themselves round to every part of the crowd, and, by degrees, the voices of the whole multitude joined in the chorus. This was the only moment at which I perceived anything like the solemn and beautiful effect which I had heard ascribed to this woodland worship. It is certain that the combined voices of such a multitude, heard at dead of night, from the depths of their eternal forests, the many fair young faces turned upward, and looking paler and lovelier as they met the moonbeams, the dark figures of the officials in the middle of the circle, the lurid glare thrown by the altar-fires on the woods beyond, did altogether produce a fine and solemn effect, that I shall not easily forget; but ere I had well enjoyed it, the scene changed, and sublimity gave place to horror and disgust.

I pass over Mrs. Trollope's bitter denunciations of what followed, and excerpt only one or two passages descriptive of the ensuing religious excitement:

How am I to describe the sounds that proceeded from this strange mass of human beings? I know no words which can convey an idea of it. Hysterical sobbings, convulsive groans, shrieks and screams the most appalling, burst forth on all sides. I felt sick with horror. As if their hoarse and overstrained voices did not make noise enough, they soon began to clap their hands violently. The scene described by Dante was before me:

*Quive sospiri, pianti, ed alti guai*

*Risonavon per l'aere. . . .*

*Orribili favelle*

*Parole di dolore, accenti d'ira*

*Voci alti e fioche, e suon di man con elle.*

Many of these wretched young creatures were young females. The preachers moved about among them, at once exciting and soothing their agonies. I heard the muttered "Sister! dear sister!" I saw the insidious lips approach the cheeks of the unhappy girls; I heard the murmured confessions of the poor victims, and I watched their tormentors, breathing into their ears consolations that tinged the pale cheek with red.

Mrs. Trollope makes her indictment of this type of religion more vivid by countless incidents:

A very pretty girl, who was kneeling in the attitude of Canova's Magdalene immediately before us, amongst an immense quantity of jargon, broke out thus: "Woe! woe to the backsliders! Hear it, hear it, Jesus! When I was fifteen my mother died, and I backslided. Oh Jesus, I backslided! Take me home to my mother, Jesus! Take me home to her, for I am weary! Oh John Mitchell! John Mitchell!" And after sobbing piteously behind her raised hands, she lifted her sweet face again, which was as pale as death, and said, "Shall I sit on the sunny bank of salvation with my mother? my own dear mother? Oh Jesus, take me home, take me home!" Who could refuse a tear to this earnest wish for death in one so young and so lovely? But I saw her, ere I left the ground, with her hand fast locked, and her head supported, by a man who looked very much as Don Juan might, when sent back to earth as too bad for the regions below.

Religious freedom, then, in America, meant debauchery, just as "equality" meant laxity. (Jefferson, Mrs. Trollope thought, must have been either a fool or a liar.) What of knowledge, of literature and the arts, in the land of the free? Well, if we are to believe our candid cousin, here too were chaos and utter night. The newspapers, the same which were to charm Matthew Arnold years later, had made the most absurd literature accessible to everyone. English literature was in outer darkness. Mrs. Trollope found no better way to evoke a laugh than to mention seriously the names of Chaucer and Spenser. Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot were taboo, not as literature, for no one had their works, but as naughty words. Prudery thrives in Columbia. Mrs. Trollope describes an evening with an American scholar, a Mr. Flint. He was also, the lady observes, what is called in America a "*serious gentleman*", a phrase which piqued her as much as any Americanism she encountered. (A bouquet of these phrases might be culled from Mrs. Trollope's writings. How she pondered over such as these: The past participle "fixed", "getting along", "out-of-the-way places", "we do not happen to have that article".) She talked with the "serious gentleman" about literature:

He spoke as Paul to the offending Jews; he did not, indeed, shake his raiment at me, but he used his pocket-handkerchief so as to answer the purpose; and if every sentence did not end with "I am clean", pronounced by his lips, his tone,

his look, his action fully supplied the deficiency. Our poor Lord Byron, as may be supposed, was the bull's-eye against which every dart in his black little quiver was aimed. I had never heard any serious gentleman talk of Lord Byron at full length before, and I listened attentively. It was evident that the noble passages which are graven on the hearts of the genuine lovers of poetry had altogether escaped the serious gentleman's attention; and it was equally evident that he knew by rote all those that they wish the mighty master had never written. I told him so, and I shall not soon forget the look he gave me.

The conversation turned to the earlier poets:

At the name of Dryden he smiled, and the smile spoke as plainly as a smile could speak, "How the old woman twaddles!" "We only know Dryden by quotations, Madam, and these, indeed, are found only in books that have long since had their day." "And Shakespeare, sir?" "Shakespeare, Madam, is obscene, and thank God, WE are sufficiently advanced to have found it out! If we must have the abomination of stage plays, let them at least be marked by the refinement of the age in which we live." This was certainly being *au courant du jour*. Of Massinger he knew nothing. Of Ford he had never heard. Gray had had his day. Prior he had never read, but he understood he was a very childish writer. Chaucer and Spencer he tied in a couple, and dismissed by saying, that he thought it was neither more nor less than affectation to talk of writers who wrote in a tongue no longer intelligible. This was the most literary conversation I was ever present at in Cincinnati.

American substitutes for literature Mrs. Trollope was unable to read. She could not endure "the inflated tone of eulogy in which our insect authors were lauded." The novels of a Mr. and Mrs. Brooks she found celebrated in an American newspaper as follows: "The lovers of impassioned and classical numbers may promise themselves much gratification from the muse of Brooks, while the many-stringed harp of his lady, the Norma of *The Courier*, which none but she can touch, has a chord for every heart." Mr. Flint's *History of the Mississippi Valley* was praised by everyone, and read by no one. Meanwhile Mr. Pierpont was known as "a very eloquent preacher, and a sweet poet." These are indeed immortal names! Throughout her journey Mrs. Trollope carried with her a horrid sense of guilt: she had never read the forty canto poem of Dr. Emmons called *The Fredoniad*. "But," she adds, "as I did not meet a single native who had, I hope this want of poetical enterprise will be excused." It should be mentioned that at Wheeling she met the famous author of the satirical novel, *Yankee Doodle Court*.



But it is in the delineation of American manners of the 'twenties that Mrs. Trollope is at her best. Her scorn stings chiefly because of the cool literalness of her manner. Real social life in this America Mrs. Trollope was unable to discover. "Billiards," she declares, "are forbidden by law, so are cards." And she adds, despairingly, of the drab life:

They have no public balls . . . they have no concerts. They have no dinner parties. I never saw a population so totally divested of gaiety; there is no trace of this feeling from one end of the Union to the other. They have no fêtes, no merry-makings, no music in the streets, no Punch, no puppet-shows. If they see a comedy or a farce, they may laugh at it; but they can do very well without it.

Mrs. Trollope's pictures of mixed parties in 1830 make one long to have lived a century earlier. From her we learn that the custom of making interminable calls had its origin in Ohio. From her, too, we learn that the appearance of a second caller never hastened the exit of the first:

They continued their employment, much as if no interruption had taken place; when the visitor entered, they would say, "How do you do?" and shake hands. "Tolerable, I thank ye, how be you?" was the reply. If it was a female, she took off her hat; if a male, he kept it on, and then taking possession of the first chair in their way, they would retain it for an hour together, without uttering another word; at length, rising abruptly, they would again shake hands, with "Well, now I must be going, I guess," and so take themselves off, apparently well contented with their reception.

Even more genial were the evening parties:

The gentlemen spit, talk of elections and the price of produce, and spit again. The ladies look at each other's dresses till they know every pin by heart; talk of Parson Somebody's last sermon on the Day of Judgment, on Dr. T'otherbody's new pills for dyspepsia, till the "tea" is announced, when they all console themselves for whatever they may have suffered in keeping awake, by taking more tea, coffee, hot cake and custard, hoe-cake, johnny-cake, waffle-cake and dodger-cake, pickled peaches, and preserved cucumbers, ham, turkey, hung beef, apple sauce, and pickled oysters, than ever were prepared in any other country of the known world.

Those who think this an unfair picture of America may perhaps derive comfort from the Americans' treatment of Mrs. Trollope herself. Here, too, although the visitor is frank in reporting what our forbears thought and said of her, the picture we some-

how retain is not of her but of them. The best instance of this is interwoven with Mrs. Trollope's other observations on our manners and language, an aspect of our culture of never-failing interest to her:

I very seldom during my whole stay in the country heard a sentence elegantly turned and correctly pronounced, from the lips of an American. There is something either in the expression or the accent that jars the feelings and shocks the taste. . . . My general appellation amongst my neighbors was "the English old woman", but in mentioning each other they constantly employed the term "lady"; and they evidently had a pleasure in using it, for I repeatedly observed that in speaking of a neighbor, instead of saying Mrs. Such-a-one, they described her as "the lady over the way what takes in washing", or as "that there lady, out by the Gulley, what is making dip-candles." Mr. Trollope was as constantly called "the old man", while draymen, butchers' boys, and the laborers on the canal were invariably denominated as "them gentlemen"; nay, we once saw one of the most gentlemanlike men in Cincinnati introduce a fellow in dirty shirt sleeves and all sorts of detestable *et cetera* to one of his friends, with this formula, "D——, let me introduce this gentleman to you!"

These ladies put Mrs. Trollope in her place. Indeed she may be said to have been punished in advance for these indiscreet letters of hers. A delicious bit of American society follows: As Mrs. Trollope was trying, in response to a question, to describe London, she was suddenly "interrupted by another lady, who exclaimed, 'Do hold your tongue, girls, about London. If you want to know what a beautiful city is, look at Philadelphia; when Mrs. Trollope has been there, I think she will allow that it is better worth talking about than that great overgrown collection of nasty, filthy, dirty streets that they call London.'"

As the letters proceed, Mrs. Trollope's sarcasm takes on a sharper edge. Her disgust is that of the well-bred; she has no secret sympathy with what she sees. She has contrived to give in these letters, with terse realism, a perfect picture of vulgarity, without appearing in the least vulgar herself. She gets under our skin. No one can read the book, if he cares in the least about America, without something very like personal chagrin, and no one—alas!—can read the letters without feeling that they are true. Wherever we read we find Americans drinking whiskey in saloons, guffawing about the British navy, and sticking countless tons of

pork. We see innumerable Colonels and Generals, without troops. We see them simpering in conscious Victorian propriety over the word "shirt". We see them stand before a picture of Hebe and shout: "What the devil has Hebe to do with the American Eagle?" We see them in the theatres in attitudes indescribable. We see them with their boots on the railings, gazing at Niagara. We see them wallowing in watermelon. We see them in their remorseless use of the English language, and in their no less remorseless spitting. This last seems to have impressed our visitors more than American institutions, American religion, or American morality. It is the burden of every letter of every visitor. And Mrs. Trollope's excuse for mentioning it must also be mine, that no picture of American life can be complete without it. Spitting is at once the national recreation and national art. The perfection of its development filled Mrs. Trollope with horror and with uncanny fascination. She cannot forget it. She speaks of it on the trains, in the theatres, and it is all she can remember of Congress. It inspires her, so level-headed, with fanatical theories: "I am inclined to think," she says, "this most vile and universal habit of chewing tobacco is the cause of a remarkable peculiarity in the male physiognomy of the Americans; their lips are almost uniformly thin and compressed. At first I accounted for this upon Lavater's theory, and attributed it to the arid temperament of the people; but it is too universal to be so explained; whereas the habit . . . enforces that position of the lips, which gives this remarkable peculiarity to the American countenance."

Finally, at the end of her volume, Mrs. Trollope leaves us with this delightful sentence: "I suspect that what I have written will make it evident that I do not like America." Possibly so, Mrs. Trollope. I confess, as one reader, that it *has* occurred to me that you do not care for America, at least for the Main Street of America. But angry as I am, and ashamed, even a century later, I cannot suspect your honesty. I should like to, but I cannot. Nor, if I can become sufficiently indifferent about what you say of us, can I doubt the force of your nature, or the precision and distinction of your style in your letters from America.

STANLEY T. WILLIAMS.